

Former Libby mine workers say company's medical plan getting tighter; W.R. Grace asks for a review of claims

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told his medical plan, paid for by W.R. Grace and Co., might not pay for his medications any more. He will take his blood-pressure medication no matter what, he said. He's already lost sight in one eye because of complications from high blood pressure. But if he has to pay, he might not be able to afford several others he takes.

"They didn't notify me about any of this. I read it in the paper," Chalmers said. "I called the pharmacy, and they didn't know anything."

Chalmers, diagnosed with

HELENA — Keith Chalmers doesn't know what will happen when he goes to the pharmacy Monday.

The Libby resident has been

asbestosis several years ago, is one of about 750 people enrolled in the Grace medical plan. The company started the program in 2000, promising lifetime medical care and prescription drug coverage for asbestos-related diseases linked to the company's now-defunct vermiculite mine in Libby.

Ore at the mine was contaminated with tremolite asbestos. Chalmers worked there for six months in the winter of 1967-1968. Former mine workers, their families and anyone else who had

lived within 20 miles of the mine or mill for at least a full year before January 2000 were eligible for the Grace plan.

Chalmers, who had been on and off Medicaid before he joined the Grace plan, called it "a godsend." He said he could finally get everything he needed.

Until recently, the company had maintained a fairly loose grip on the program. Nearly everyone who applied was accepted, and the plan paid for most prescription

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drugs, including some for illnesses not related to asbestos.

Chalmers' blood-pressure medications appear to be among those now on the no-pay list, although he said his trouble breathing seems to drive up his blood pressure.

Frank Fahland, a pharmacist at Libby Drug, said he didn't see any blood-pressure medications on the new formulary he received Wednesday. Inhalers often needed by people whose breathing is restricted, and antibiotics to treat infections like pneumonia were on the list, he said.

Until last week, Fahland said, the Grace plan was "covering damn near everything under the sun."

On Wednesday, he said, five or six people left the pharmacy without their prescriptions because their drugs were no longer covered, and they couldn't pay. Another man who usually gets four prescriptions left with only one.

Alan Stringer, a former mine operator who is now Grace's representative in Libby, said nothing about the plan itself is any different: He said it was always intended to cover asbestos-related medical care and prescription drugs, and it still does. But Grace has asked the plan administrator, Health Network America, to audit past applications and begin screening new applications and claims, something never done before.

"We want this program to take care of people who have an asbestos-related issue," Stringer said. "We don't want this program taking care of people who don't."

Stringer said he regrets that Grace and HNA did not let people know beforehand that they might see some changes in what is covered and what is not.

"We probably should have been a little more sensitive of that," Stringer said. "Regardless of that fact, there were medications that were being paid for that weren't neces-

sarily related to an asbestos-related disease."

But the changes make Chalmers and many others suspicious. People began finding out about changes in their drug coverage about the same time they found out that the federal government is intervening in W.R. Grace and Co.'s Chapter 11 bankruptcy filing, contending the company may have transferred money into spin-off companies to avoid liability in asbestos-related damage claims.

"They probably figure that the government will win their case against them, so they're not going to pay any more than they have to," Chalmers said. He said he wouldn't be surprised if the company dropped the medical plan altogether.

Stringer said there are no plans to cut, cap or drop the medical plan, and money is not the issue.

"We were committed to it two years ago, and we are still committed to it today," he said. "All that's happening right now is nothing different than what any insurance company would do."

Dr. Steven Cardos, founder and chief executive officer of HNA, said there has been "absolutely, 100 percent, no change" to the rules for admission to the Grace medical plan.

But after looking over many applications, he said, "we began to realize that there may be patients diagnosed with a disease who don't have it."

HNA has asked Dr. Paul Wheeler, a radiologist with Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, to help review the chest x-rays of people admitted or applying to the plan.

Wheeler, who has been reviewing chest X-rays for signs of disease for more than 30 years, said he has testified for large corporations in asbestos lawsuits but doesn't recall ever testifying for Grace. He said plaintiffs in asbestos suits have simply never come to him.

Stringer said Grace had nothing to do with choosing Wheeler.

